



## THE EXHIBITION OF WORDS: A (POLITICAL) IDEA OF THEATRE\*

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TRANSLATED BY DUANE H. DAVIS

### Translator's Introduction

It is with great pleasure that I undertake this project. I gain pleasure not only from performing a labor of love for a dear friend, Denis Guénoun, but also to provide a gift for all for all Anglophones. Not since Sartre has such an original voice emerged upon the French scene. Guénoun writes with authority across many disciplines in the grand tradition of French intellectuals: philosophy, theatre, history, literature, theology; yet he writes with the irreverent and powerful voice necessary to command attention from experts in every one of these fields.

For works that Guénoun cites that remain untranslated, I have left the citations in French. However, when the author has chosen to include a quote from these works in a footnote or in the body of the text, I have translated the passages. Words to note:

*représentation*—representation [the performance] re-presents like re-assembles

*récit*—recitation, (telling of a story), narrative

*l'attroupement*—gathering

*la salle*—(1) auditorium

[but Guénoun also uses *l'auditoire*]

—(2) house, when the context indicates the room *and* the audience

*l'assistance*—audience [that plays a role. helps perception and understanding]

*la tribune*—gallery

*mise-en-scène*—directed, but literally put-on-stage

*mise en jeu*—putting in play

*jeu*—play, but also act—*joueur*, player, actor

Guénoun is an accomplished playwright, actor, and director who led his own company for many years. His analysis of theater is an informed description. Because of this, I suggested this term, *phenomenology of theatre*, to Guénoun, and he did not object to it. But it is not the case that he explicitly calls attention to the phenomenological tradition nor that he is bound up with whatever metaphysical baggage the reader may think is associated with this tradition.

### I.

Theatre requires a reassembly of spectators. Some other arts ask for this like theatre—music, dance; but others do not—literature, painting, sculpture.<sup>1</sup> I do not intend to say that these arts dispense with the public. That much is evident. But their public must not necessarily be reassembled in a single common place and time for the work to reach them: marble, frame and book can wait for a visitor or a reader who will come, alone, when he or she wants. Objection: theatre can be read. But this reading is not that which constitutes it. Theatre is not—only—dialogical literature. It requires a public that is collective, effectively reunited. This is the determined mode of its presentation.

This meeting [*réunion*] is called for by public convocation. One could cite some contrary cases—private theatre, theatre in one's family. There again, it is a question of exceptions, even antiphrasis: a use of the term by a sort of passage to the limit, as one could do against any definition. An auto-mobile moves itself, and yet sometimes one has to push it. Theatre is public: the same word serves to designate the assembly of spectators.

(We speak of the word *public*, but also of the word *theatre*. We recall that, in the Greek place from which the term theatre comes to us, *theatron* does not designate the stage—that is the *skênê*—, but the tiers where the people sit. This will change: later, in fact the word comes to denote the area of the play. Classical French language sees the actors “on theatre.” And this sliding from one space to the other is sign of a history. For us, “theatre” designates by extension

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\*\* To Robert Abirached

<sup>1</sup> For the moment, we are considering each of these arts before their mechanized reproduction was rendered possible.



the whole building. But from the beginning theatre is the place of the public—of the assembled people.)

Let us formulate a thesis here: no matter what the purpose, a convocation summoned by public appeal, the reassembly taking place, is a political act. It is political by virtue of the reassembly itself (which, as the assembled, contains all the seeds, developed or not, of the political) and by its publicity (“public” designates at first, according to *Robert*,<sup>2</sup> that which concerns the people taken ensemble, the social and political collectivity, the State). This is a thesis: discussable, decided. I pose it here.

Theatre is therefore an intrinsically political activity. This is so not only by reason of what is shown or debated there—although all of this is not without relevance. But, in a more ordinary fashion, prior to its content, it is political by the act, the nature of the reassembly that establishes it. What is political, regarding the origin of theatre, is not the *represented*, but the *representation*—its existence, its bearing, its “physique” if one wants to say it this way, as assembly, as public meeting [*réunion*], as convocation, and as a gathering [*attroupement*]. The purpose of the assembly is not irrelevant; but the political is at work before the posing of any such purpose. It is political by the fact that some individuals are rejoined, reconnected, publicly, overtly, and that their confluence is a political affair—an affair of circulation, fiscality, propaganda, or the maintenance of order.

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This determination is as fundamental as it is easily forgotten. One is surprised to note to what extent thought on theatre barely addresses it: a thought whose history could be told as the development of a neglect of representation—of the act, of the event of representation—for the sake of the attention borne to the represented, to the content.

As we shall see, this evolution—amnesia, blindness, or censorship, as one wishes—doubles a line of the history of theatre itself. It is a displacement of the center, of the heart, of the home of this art—an obscuring of the hall [*salle*], and an illumination of the stage.

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The political act of convoking a representation can call the public into a street or an edifice—even into a field, although this is rare. In the street, this is a gathering: it is political by virtue of the choice of the place (in a city or a town, on the outskirts or at the center), of the time (day, night, leisure time or work time), likewise by virtue of the composition and form of the assembly. Each of these characteristics conveys a very precise rapport with the organization of the city and formulates a sort of discourse through this rapport—conscious, deliberate, explicit or not, this is for now irrelevant to the business at hand. These positions are taken publicly—and physically occupied—in the space of the political.

Something remains of these determinations in an edifice. The first inscriptions of the political are: the site of a building (suburb or old-town?), its form and the system of its internal functions, which implies a decision regarding the chosen hour; the duration, and the unfolding of the performance. First and foremost, the political urgency that orders theatre is architecture. This does not mean that that which is played in the theatre is without political signification, without bearing. Simply, that which is played out is preliminarily ordered by architecture<sup>3</sup>—literally put on stage [*mis en scène*] by it. As one knows, architecture is architectural: it is art instituted by the political, which perhaps institutes it in return. To think theatre beginning from that which happens on the stage, unaware of that which the existence, form, place, and space [*volume*] of this stage owe to a construction—which is not universal and does not go without saying—this would be to think theatre by forgetting the political which orders it: the prescription, the political convocation which directs it to the stage [*qui le met-en-scène*].

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Now, a voyage to the land of theatrical architecture (a voyage in time as well as in space) suggests the following assertion: the immense majority of theatres have been built according to a circular plan.

The object here is not to argue for this point. It suffices to recall that, even only to consider occidental theatres, the three principal architectures that mark history—Greco-Roman, Elizabethan, and that which is called the “Italian style,”—have produced round areas [*volumes*]. Why?<sup>4</sup>

First of all, it seems, because the circle is well-disposed for people to see and to hear. By this fixing

2 This is the name of a standard French dictionary.—[trans.]

3 Prescribed, directed, asked—formulated as a command.

4 Let us specify, however—for the sake of the reader who might think only of “theaters in the round,” types of circular arenas which have been made the object of diverse experimentation, and who would be astonished at our thesis, since indeed they are rarely strong. The rotundity designates here the ancient amphitheater, for example, constructed on the arc of a circle; the perfect cylinder of Elizabethan theater—the celebrated design of the Globe—where the galleries rejoin the scenic space and even seat certain spectators behind the stage; or also a majority of our theatres said to be in “the Italian style,” although more often they are bastardizations, where the circularity is assumed mainly by the balconies, which return to reach the delimited edge [*qui reviennent jusqu’aux bords du cadre*] (and by the orchestra, where the seats are often set up in very wide curved lines). Perhaps that which we call circular theater here can be defined just as well in a negative fashion: this is a theatre where one does not see lateral walls hidden by spectators. In a rectangular house [*salle*], the rows of chairs lead, to the right and to the left, to large walls, empty or decorated. On the contrary, in the houses [*salles*] that we call round, all differences aside, one sees only the sides of the people [*du public*] (in balconies, or in the tiers of the amphitheater), whose most lateral seats almost reach the stage.



of space, theatres recommence the spontaneous agency of a gathering. Anyone who has set a platform in a public place knows that the passers-by arrange themselves along the arc of a perfect circle—at least if the space permits of no obstacle.

This explanation does not suffice. Due to the evolution of shows, theatres in the round no longer offer the best visibility, no more so than others. Now, all attempts to construct halls [*salles*] of a more rigid frontal orientation [*frontalité plus dure*] (rectangular constructions, where each spectator is made to face the stage), if, indeed, they produced places where all the public is supposed to see well, made some theatres detestable—frigid, to say the least. What reason is there from that time for this preeminence of the circular?

Is it necessary to think that our two senses contradict one another? Since in the halls [*salles*] that are entirely oriented toward the front [*entièrement frontale*], if the spectators toward the back see well (better than the lateral extremities of the balconies in our old theatres, places reputed to be quasi-blind), in return they hear much less.<sup>5</sup> This is true. However, there exist some rectangular halls [*salles*] with excellent acoustics, but which nonetheless suffer from that which we will provisionally call coldness—the absence of this mysterious “good rapport” between stage and hall [*scène et salle*], to which all actors make reference, without ever being able to define it other than by a sort of sensation which is enigmatic but incontestable.

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What is important is somewhere else. One looks for it—the reader expects as much—in the political origin of theatrical representation. It is founded upon an ingenious observation: the circle is the disposition that permits the public to see *itself* [*qui permet au public de se voir*].

In a group, in order that everyone should see all the others, it is necessary to be in a circle. The circle is not the arrangement that permits one to be heard (one can hear something behind one’s back); rather, it permits one to be seen, and even to distinguish others—not as a mass, but as a reunion of individuals. It permits one to see faces—to recognize one another [*de se reconnaître*].

Now the public of the theatre is not a crowd. Nor is it a juxtaposition [*côtoiement*] of isolated individuals. This public requires a concrete feeling of its collective existence. It wants to see itself, to recognize itself as a group. It wants to perceive its own reactions, the emotions that course through it: the contagions within its breast, of laughter, affliction, and suspense. This is a voluntary reunion, founded on a sharing. This is a community—at least of hopes and dreams.

In the years following the Liberation, one wanted to build halls [*salles*] in France where the whole public would see well. There was here a preoccupation that was said to be democratic, and that was defined more exactly as egalitarian. Sometimes, for reasons of modernism as much as for economy, one also hoped to present theatre and cinema in one single place. This was a complete failure. Theatre and cinema do not reunite their publics in the same manner. Cinema authorizes an individual relation between the spectator and the screen. At certain periods of its history, it even encouraged this. Thus for the past twenty years in these little halls, comfort is elaborated for each one, sunk into an armchair, forget the entourage.<sup>6</sup> In this case, the rectangular shape is suitable: it privileges the best possible vision of each chair facing toward the image. It does not hinder, but neither does it encourage communication within the public. One can see a film alone in a movie theater [*salle*] and find great pleasure there.

One cannot enjoy theatre alone. If the hall [*salle*] is deserted, the play suffers. The spectators want the perception of their collective being-there [*être-là*]. The public wants to feel, to hear, and to approve its appurtenance\*\*\*\*\*, its reunion. It wants to be stared-at.<sup>7</sup>

This is why theatres need to be circular.<sup>8</sup>

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What is political about this necessity?

Let us forget theatre for an instant. The circle permits a group to recognize itself. Therefore, this is also to say: it is the form of assemblies—at least of free assemblies. This presupposes a self-conscious community that decides its own fate. The amphitheatre expresses this idea of the city: it reunites the entire people, or its representatives. But in either case, its rotundity designates the community itself—its unity, its autonomy. It

<sup>5</sup> Very simply because they are far away. In two halls [*salles*] of equal capacity, the spectators least well-situated are found at either of the extreme lateral limits of the balconies (and therefore, in an execrable relation for vision but very close to the stage): this is the case of circular theater. Or else they are relegated to the back ranks (in the frontal hypothesis), and therefore face the stage, but are very distant. The price of the tickets often expresses this hierarchy.

<sup>6</sup> This relation is possible at the cinema, and it is dominant there today. But it is not obligatory: it does not enter into the definition of cinema. At the beginning of the century, the “cinematographic theaters” held more of a popular, fun, and festive reassembly. And today no one would give to the spectacle of film again this lost dimension (more collective, pleasant) in order to combat the disaffection of the movie theaters.

<sup>7</sup> This demand exists outside of theater—in a stadium, for example. This is a common point between theater and sport. Here is an exercise: to look—for the difference—elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> We do not pretend that in theater each spectator sees and recognizes all the others. Theatrical architecture is complex. It results from concurrent necessities. The circle finds it, but in multiple fashions. One can say here that if the arc shape is generally widespread, it is necessary to look for the primary reason for this adequation of the circle in the communitarian recognition. From this, the circle is acknowledged or distorted, triumphs or retreats, is accomplished or fragmented.



is the condition of the deliberation, as well as its figure—the proper scheme of the collective in democracy.

Inversely, an assembly that reunites in straight rows favors the vision of the spectacle by each participant. Here one is poised in the gallery [*la tribune*] as in an old classroom, which cares little about giving rise to a communitarian consciousness in the audience—rather, one would fear it. Preference is given to a direct relation of authority, between master and disciples. The frontally-oriented reassembly, arranged in straight rows and parallels, wants to combat and to deconstruct the consciousness belonging to a group that deliberates its own history. It dismembers the community; it subjugates it. It regroups the community in the manner of soldiers gathered under revue in the heart of the barracks. Do we ever see a Parliament disposed in rectilinear rows, aligned facing a gallery? This is the infallible image of an authoritarian regime. Likewise for Congresses and colloquia of all sorts. Their symbolic effect is all the more directive the less round their disposition.<sup>9</sup>

Let us return to theatres. The circular architecture that predisposes them therefore gives a glimpse of a cardinal relation for our remaining purpose here (a complex relation, which it will be necessary to observe without reducing it—but a relation all the same): an original affinity between theatre and democracy.

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It is not a question of pretending that theatre is democracy, nor the inverse. This comparison [*rapprochement*] concerns the forms: it points to a resemblance between the original form of theatre and the form of the democratic assembly. At least this is so in the sense in which this word is meant here: an assembly that deliberates—and therefore decides—its own history. What does this resemblance tell us?

It says that democracy wants to express the City as a community. It says that this is truly the question of the community (desire, nostalgia, will of the community, one will see) that acts in the convocation of a group as the public of theatre. We will try to understand *why* this question is at work there. But we know *how*: in the form of the assembly of the public, in the circular arrangement that permits it to recognize itself.

And without doubt this leads us to give a little more substance to our determination of the political implication of theatre (of the act, of the holding of the theatrical representation, before all examination of its contents or its unfolding). Indeed, we have said it already: the convoking of spectators is a public act—which is undertaken [*s'engage*] in the space of the organization of the city. And it is never indifferent: whatever may be the form of the State and its regime, whatever it may be called publicly; it is a gathering [*reunion*] where it will become a matter of the desire for community. Perhaps this desire will arise in a feeble manner, in a veiled [*voilée*] or fearful fashion. Perhaps it will be a matter of constraints or diversions [*détournements*]. But it will arise there [*il s'y agitera*]—or else it will not be theatre. And the State cannot be indifferent to the public provocation of a reassembly of this sort, whether it be the object of its smile or its alarm.

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The circularity of theatre is a political predisposition. This announcement calls for two complements.

Let us observe the mock-up of the Globe: it is a nearly perfect cylinder. Let us also look at the plan of an authentic Italian theatre: the hall [*salle*] is quasi-circular, until rejoining the stage. All the more, it looks like the first Greek theatres—made of wood—from what we can know of it. In all of these cases, the space of the public is reclosed by the sides towards the place of the actors. That can be reformulated otherwise, after a slight shift of focus: the actors are part of the circle, they are the complement of it, the closure. They act at the place where its rotundity is achieved.

The purity of the layout does not meet with our interest in this consideration. But it has an immediate corollary: the actors are members of the reassembled community. The stage is in the hall [*salle*]. That which is played on the stage is not heterogeneous with that which takes place in public. The stage is occupied by a fraction of the community, who find themselves there—originally—through the effect of a sort of delegation. Or if one pleases, it happens by election (according to the double resonance of the word—the affinitive and the political).

(Saying this, one does not intend to affirm that the actor is a member of the community by provenance or by origin. No: the actor enters into the assembly through the act—the political act—of representation. From the very beginning of theatre, it often comes to pass that the actor is a travelling stranger. This does not exclude the actor from the reunited community. On the contrary, the moment of theatre knows when to be this strange story's and storyteller's invitation into the city [*de ce récit et de ce récitant, étranges*].)

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Here is another corollary: the history of theatre seems to be made of a succession of alternating inverse episodes. In certain epochs, one sees the circle surge forth, to form itself in its complete roundness. Then come times—longer—when it appears embattled, divided, and flattened.

It is divided at first. The stage is opposed the rest of the circle. It is elevated and separated: it is instituted. Its limit within the hall [*salle*] is changed, from the approximation that it was, a provisional and practical

<sup>9</sup> There would be more to say of the mixed forms, such as the monarchical assemblies of which, initially at least, the orders are made to face one another in compact groups. What the city sees of itself, there, is its division, its structure. It represents itself for its own gaze not as a reunion of individuals, but as composition of Bodies.



passage [*couloir*], into a bar, a barrier.

Next, it is flattened. The separated stage wants to be stretched out: in breadth, in depth. One sees less well from the sides. The arc of the circle that is henceforth the hall [*salle*] (since it has been amputated into a fragment) widens irresistibly. The curve attenuates. The theatre becomes a little more frontally-oriented. Face to face, forehead to forehead, spaces are affronted.

This narrative, in the form that we give to it here, is evidently a story of origins. The succession is not factual at this point nor is it so linear. And yet, the history of theatre knows in truth these moments of brute irruption, of intense invention where the art seems to regenerate: the Greek moment, for sure, the Elizabethan moment, and the Italian moment. One also could point to a sort of revolutionary moment in the Europe of the twenties. These are the times when the political of the representation (in the sense we approach it here—as agitation of a communitarian desire, and public proclamation of the vivacity of this desire) is affirmed without prudence, often with gaiety. And these are the moments where the circle is reformed.

After which comes the return of order: the circle expands and the fissure defining the stage hardens.

But, to follow this analysis, it is necessary to deduce that, even in the worst epochs of the flattening of theatre, this process cannot be carried out to its end. It cannot reduce the play [*représentation*] to the face to face, accomplished by an authoritarian stage and for a defeated community. Had it succeeded, at that point theatre would have vanished. And so long as theatre subsists, as feeble as it may be, something remains of the desired community, of the recognition, of the sharing—and therefore of the circle.

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The widening of the arcs of the circle—the flattening of the theatre—is not the only witness of this sort of repression of the representation [*représentation*] for the sake of the represented—of this forgetting, this censure of the political origin. Here is another example: the direction of light and shadow.

In the great epochs of theatre (the political meaning of which we are beginning to sketch), the assembly of the spectators is visible. Therefore, it is illuminated. Sometimes the performance [*représentation*] takes place in open air and in the light of day—as in the time of the Greeks. It is the same at night; the street theatre is bathed in the lights of the village. The halls [*salles*] are luminous: fires, lamps—and the Globe Theatre has no roof. It is only for certain periods, and in some defined contexts, that the audience plunges into shadow. The effect—the political effect—is determined: the hall [*salle*] is lost for the sake of the stage, as one can lose one's body in a dream. The hall absents itself. The stage appears alone even though it is not—at least because the public can hear its own noises and its own silences. But it does not see itself. It is imaginarily excluded from the performance [*représentation*], of which it is, however, the primary foundation.

Nor can this obscuring annihilate the political fact of the performance [*représentation*—it only darkens the experience it has of itself. The performance [*représentation*] remains a political act, but it knows it—sees it—less. No more than the repression of a desire destroys it or suppresses its role (it disguises its figure), the act of plunging the hall [*salle*] into darkness does not dissolve the public. This would be to absent theatre from itself. The repression of the political is political also. Here, it has the effect of covering the agitated community of gathered [*réunis*] individuals with a veil—only to let a little part of it appear, intensely illuminated, which emerges on the stage. This often plants an idea of theatre as a sub-species of magic.

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In order to finish with these comments on roundness, let us look here at one last trait of this history, one of its most distinctive traits: the destiny of the orchestra.

The arrangement of the public in circular tiers results in the clearing of a floor space—also circular—between the first rows and the stage. Evidently this is not arbitrary, it is forced. One observes a clown or a singer in the street and one will see the audience spontaneously re-distribute [*répartie*] into a circle, allowing a great empty space to form in front of the singer or the mime. There again, the closest spectators are on the sides. In theatre, we have become habituated to having this place filled by seats. But this is a recent evolution.

The Greeks make use of this place through a sovereign equilibrium of coherence and invention. They inscribe the evolution of the chorus there. From what one knows of it, the chorus is a group few in number (with regard to this large space) whose activity clearly differs from that of actors: they sing and dance. As such, it seems to us that they constitute the most attractive and popular element of the performance [*représentation*]. Above all—and therein lies the invention—they are not comprised of show business “professionals.” Unlike the stage actors, the members of the chorus are everyday people [*gens du peuple*]. They are recruited for a very limited period in order to participate in the festival. They only act in the play in a provisional way. They issue directly from the assembly of the public.

The actor is too, as we have affirmed; but this is not at all according to the same regimen. The actor enters into the assembly by virtue of taking part in the play. His existence—as a member of a professional brotherhood—bears witness to an original evolution that distinguishes the narrator from his audience. In tragedies, most often the principal actor is also the poet. His function on the stage ought to be made the object of profound analysis—a political analysis, since he often plays the king, or one who holds power, or his messenger, or his spokesperson, his interpreter. The poetic speech that is announced on the stage is an



interpretation of political signs, even though this interpretation is not itself political, that is to say internal to political discourse. But we are not getting ahead of ourselves on this point. The stage figures [*figure*] authority and power. It speaks, fictively, in its own name. And the actor to be found there is already distinct from the hall [*salle*], like the power in the city. Simply, the act of performance [*représentation*], and the circular arrangement that organizes it, integrates this authority and its discourse as a part of the reunited community. It poses it as a detached fragment of its circle, and not as an external irruption, celestial incident, or divine graft. The stage is in the theatre like Olympus is in Greece: eminent, but circumscribed. It is the same way that Greece is represented, less here than outside it: not as alterity of essence, but as an altered fragment of itself. The stage is the figure—architectural and poetic—of an exteriority thus set within the assembly. It is the community's sign for what is foreign [*l'étrange*].

The chorus emanates directly from the people. Its members are part of the community of citizens who are provisionally delegated to sing and dance. The public sees it, and thus sees itself by delegation, figuration, and metonymy. The chorus is exactly a representation of the public—in the political and mimetic sense of this term. One will not resist, here again, a little anticipation of the remarks to come—regarding the content and that which is represented in theatre. Since it is really necessary to remark, without waiting, that this delegation of the chorus by a community has its inscription legible in the text. The chorus represents the people—in the narrative. The stage is the figure of the assembled citizens before the King. They interrogate him, looking to him for meaning, accounts, and answers [*réponses*]. Tragedy recounts the King's responses [*réponses*] to the people—his responsibility. This is the invention of Greek theatre: the projection on the central area, disengaged from the ground by the circular constitution of rows, of a group of singers and dancers issued from the people by direct delegation. And so the people see, as they see themselves, at the feet of the authority that hangs over them. It is the calling upon from below, demanding speech and meaning from authority.

This circular floor space placed between the theatre and the stage is called the orchestra. The word comes from a Greek verb that means to dance. It is the place where one sees the chorus who dance. But why do they dance? Why does it define this space? Why does it leave its trace (imperceptible, forgotten) in the etymology of the orchestra? To respond to this, for once, one anticipates too much.

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Let us only note, for now, the destiny to come of this astonishing place. Little by little its void will be occupied by two sorts of crowds.

First, it was occupied by the public in the armchairs of the orchestra. The occupation of this space by the seats came late. In the Elizabethan theatre, and often still in the nineteenth century, the public stood there. It was a strolling space, often animated and noisy. The actors deplored the indiscipline of the “pit” [*parterre*]. It was the territory of the least fortunate among the public—in contrast to the way it would become when the front seats were fixed.

The other occupant that comes to settle there after the disappearance of the chorus is the group of musicians (which kept from this its name of orchestra). For a long time the orchestra maintained the trace of an ensemble emanating from the people. One could see this in small villages, for example, where the orchestra reunites local musicians—when the singers on stage are frequently travelers coming from the capital or from another land. Their cooperation evokes these religious functions, where the choir—the chorus—is composed of parishioners; meanwhile the officiating person lends his voice to the all-powerful discourse of the Other.

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Indeed—why maintain that the actor is on the stage by delegation or by election? The same goes for the chorus, which emanated directly from the people. But what about the actor, if he or she is a foreigner, traveling?

Let us make new use of a fictitious story of origins: a public reassembles itself in the festival halls of a small village. The space is empty, the ground bare. The night before there was a ball, the chairs were piled against the wall. Someone raises a platform. Before that, two risers were folded in a corner. Some chairs are set up in a circle. Everyone sits. The president of the association thanks the mayor, the fireman. Next he invites the actor to climb up onto the platform. The actor climbs up. Perhaps he or she is a resident of the town who is known by many—this is not very probable. More often the actor is a traveler who just arrived that morning. They ask him to ascend to the stage: the group, that is, by its representing voice [*par la voix de son épresentant*], calls upon him, delegates him to the place of narration, of the maker of histories. The original constitution of theatre answers to this story. The actor is only on the stage by invitation, by election of those assembled—even if he is a visitor for one day.

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It remains for us to think what strange bond knots together the authority with the outside, the other—so that the community so often calls upon a stranger often to take the role (bear the mask, pronounce the speeches) of the holding of power.



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What can we conclude from this? Theatre takes place in a politically predisposed space. Why? What sort of affinity (of the theatrical with the political) expresses this relationship of the sites?

At first, it is this: theatre reunites a public that has, or believes it has, the capacity for political decision. In the time of the Greeks, the public was the entire city. All the citizens are brought together. The state helps them, allows to them a tax deduction [*un anti-impôt*], a subvention owed to the public. All the people, potentially, would be seen on the tiers—which are the same ones used there for the political assembly, temporary and removable wooden rows put back up for the occasion. The charm of the moment is so strong that the village remains deserted. Aristophanes says that thieves' hearts jump for joy at abandoned houses. This is the political itself, the reunited *polis*, that therefore constitutes the space of theatrical action [*l'espace du fait théâtral*]. This is the instance of political power—apt for political decision—attending the performance [*qui assiste à la représentation*].

The observation also goes for theatre of the royal court. The court reunited at the theatre is that which, by its proximity to the king and his influence on it, exercises authority on public life. It comprises the family, the ministers, the counselors, and the coterie. The King himself can appear there. The modern public validates this assessment [*constat*] again. The generations that exert themselves in street theatre are those who believe that the Street makes the political decisions (the place of insurrection, the place of revolution). The bourgeois public of the Boulevard want to hold the reins of the city. The assembly of notables who fill certain provincial halls [*salles*] see themselves as directing local public life. And the teachers, the middlemen [*cadres moyens*], or amateurs who support the theatre of Art think of themselves as active subjects of the modern liberal democracy. Even the coming of the public “worker”—most often composed of cadres or agitators and union members—which made for a certain theatre said to be popular after the Liberation, cannot be understood without the hope and the will of participation in political decision in these sectors of a society, in a phase of strong unionization [*syndicalisation*].

(One can deduce it from this, which holds for current times: if the correlation is exact, one will not be astonished at the decline in theatre attendance in this period of political disaffection. The abstention simultaneously affects the two spaces. Theatre could only see its recovery in an epoch of reanimated democracy: because a public only comes to the theatre when it believes, know or wills—for that matter—when it is politically active.)

For all of these assemblies, convened in their own political capacity [*habilitation*], the circle permits self-recognition. On the tiers, the Greek city finds itself and sees itself.<sup>10</sup> In the Italian halls [*salles*], the bourgeois public likes to exhibit itself. The balconies there are favorable—the standing house [*salle*] can applaud a conspicuous arrival. Certain loggia are juxtaposed to the stage. The view from there is disastrous, but one can be seen very well. On the stage of the royal court, the King shows himself. Sometimes he, along with the nobility, was seated on the stage at the edge of the action.<sup>11</sup> At the theatre, an idea (a view) of the reassembled city is exhibited. This is a theatre of the world: the city is seen as an analogue of the cosmos—and theatre figures its spherical unity—the Globe.

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Theatre comes to be in the space of the political. It is a space marked, occupied, and pre-disposed by the aptitude (real or fictitious) for political deliberation and decision.

Is this to say that the theatre participates in politics? No, precisely not. Theatre takes place in political space, but makes emerge there something other than that which would make it the political itself. Theatre is there in place of the political (in its space [*place*], but also in the place of the political—as usurped.) Theatrical performance [*epresentation*] consists in producing, in the area prepared and determined thusly, other speech, other signs, and other emergent meanings.

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Now we see what is borne of this first line of thought—a provisional conclusion, a hypothesis: theatre comes to be in the space of the political, and it produces there something else (than the political).

What?

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We have noted many times that the development of thought here above concerns the theatrical performance [*représentation*]. This is first of all an examination of what is shown and announced there, and above all represented. It is necessary to come to this point now, and to ask for what activity the public reunites [*se*

<sup>10</sup> Collectively, to be sure, bear in mind the dimension and the number. For the size, one thinks rather of our modern stadia—where the recognition plays out also, but with different rules, those of simulated combat, around which the inhabitants of the cities manifest this brutal desire to affirm their appurtenance—sometimes found again in the game as a real war.

<sup>11</sup> The disposition of the theater of the court was not necessarily round. This is because the society was extremely hierarchical. If the King is on the stage, one sees of the city what is necessary to see of it—like a Stalinian parliament.



*réunit*] in this theatre. What is that communal attraction that takes place elsewhere with regard to other public reunions of comparable aspect—at the concert, at the stadium, at mass? An audience reassembles at the theatre—to do what?

In order to see. To see and to hear, to be present, to perceive—all are essential. But without doubt, to see is the most essential aspect. Theatre is derived from the Greek verb that means to look at something. And if, in ancient architecture, the word designated the place of the public (even better than the stage or the orchestra), it is mainly for this root: theatre (the tiers) is the place from where one sees it.

A current expression propos of a well-performed play or a talented actor is that it is a good reading of the text [*qu'il donne à entendre le texte*]. This is a misuse of language. To give a reading of a text is to give a reading out loud. But a reading, even a public reading, is not theatre. It is an activity that is tied up with theatre in bonds that are profound and complex. We will see this shortly. But it is infra-, extra-, or proto- theatrical, as one wills, and not exactly theatrical.

Then how do we make sense of the fact that certain readings give the impression of theatre (and sometimes that a play that is performed again is done as well as before in intelligence, pleasure, and one might even say in theatricality)? It is that something is given there to see that can be eminently theatrical. We imagine the listening public to be a tape recording.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this is the destiny of the ear alone. All theatre is proscribed by it. The public reading produces the effects of theatre because the reader, who is supposed to make the text meaningful [*qui à supposé donner la texte entendre*], is seen. Theatre arises in this vision.

Theatre arises only when something is presented for viewing. But this showing alone is not enough, since there are other gatherings that give us something to see, and not only theatre (i.e., at the stadium, at mass). Accordingly, we must make a more precise determination. This is not to say any more than that theatre is tantamount to its showing. Bringing-to-view does not exhaust its nature. Theatre does not show things indifferently. But for theatre to take form, it must be visible. It is the home, the heart of its coming to be [*son avènement*].

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(So, is there never theatre for the blind? Yes, there is; but only in the extreme sense that gives them vision [*leur donne à voir*].)

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The public reassembles itself. It is to see. Next question: what do they come to look at? What shows theatre to them?

We will proceed by approaches, by approximations—narrowing in little by little, if all goes well. We will observe the most frequent case (before coming to it through limit-situations, through confines, through borders). Generally, the text is what is brought to the stage. A text is a sequence of words. Words are the elements of language. And language is not of the visible order.

Here it is a question of indicating two plans of reflection. First, it is a fact—empirical, if one wills—that language is established first in speech, and therefore in the sensory realm, in the element of hearing. Originally, words appertain to the sonorous universe. They are not seen. That which wants theatre, that which it produces, that toward which it works, is the making-seen. It is the showing of words, which are, by nature, in the element of the invisible. Theatre wants to exhibit the invisible, to give it to vision [*le donner à voir*].

Let the reader be assured: I am aware that there is something called writing, and that writing is precisely the visual transcription of language. I even believe that I understand that this transcription initially traverses speech, and thus that it marks the origin and does not authorize some non-sonorous space for it—any sort of pure, pre-scriptural space anterior to the effectuation of its traces. But writing produces determinate signs and graphics, even pictorials—and I want to affirm that this visibility in writing is not that for which theatre aims. Theatre does not work to make words become visible by exposing numbers and letters to be looked at. Staging a production [*Une mise en scène*] is not the presentation before the public of big, traced characters. This difference is profound and essential. First, it means that theatre is not visual in the same way that painting is. A painting, positioned on the stage, is not theatrical. This kind of pictorial work of the first importance could pass by nearly unnoticed there. Good scenery paintings, considered on their own, are most often poor paintings. And the good painter-decorators know how to play to this difference. The giving-to-vision that delivers painting and that which calls theatre forth are heterogeneous. By this theatre diverges from the way that writing participates in the pictorial, and therefore from this sort of making-seen of words.

But writing is not only a region of painting. It produces a visual dimension that traverses and exceeds the space of painted works or sketches. It is an archi-system of traces, at the same time abstract and physical, but obviously, it is not the object of this study to (re)produce this theory. I will note only that the recourse to the visible that takes place in writing emerged bound with the absence of speech. It takes place with the departure of the interlocutor, the default of his or her effective presence, the absence or the indisposition of one who speaks to pronounce this discourse at the place and the time where writing leads it. Theatre does not

<sup>12</sup> It is the destiny, for example, of listening to the voice of one who has disappeared, or to listen to a recorded work in the theater where stereophonic circuits were placed on the stage. (This is not a fiction. I have participated in a presentation [*séance*] of this sort.)





give to vision the traces, deposits, or substitutes of a part of speech. Theatre wants the body and the voice. It wants speech itself in the act of its utterance. And it wants to see it.

(This does not lead to the hasty conclusion that theatre is bereft of writing—a visible event of pure, immediate presence. Hell no!)

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In this sense, therefore, language is not in the element of the visible. It is the first plan of the reflection: the words are in-visible because they announce sonorously. This concerns their materiality, their body—the order of signifiers, to speak roughly.

But words participate also in the non-visible by the element of their signified. Indeed, this is of the intellectual order—of the intelligible, and as such distinct from the sensible of which the visible is a part. One tries to guard oneself against the effects of sliding: first because the contents of intelligibility can well include some signifiers whose referents are visible things, signifiers that therefore deal with the visible, which think it. Thus we have the word *red*, whose signifier is neither itself red nor therefore visible (no more than the concept of dog barks).

Moreover, in the traditional topics of meaning, the intellect has recourse to a visual metaphor to designate its own status: thought as the mind's eye. But this, at least at first approach, remains a figure of speech. And, even if in the end it is difficult to imagine a concept of the intelligible entirely disengaged from this visual metaphor, one is justified in respecting the distinction—if only to mix them completely. I maintain, therefore, on an operative basis, that the words, by their signifiers as well, (and therefore in all that they open toward the intelligible) participate in an element fundamentally non-sensible—and therefore, non-visual.

The words are sounds and meanings—doubly “un-showable” [*immontrables*]. And theatre wants to give them to vision.

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Because, according to theatre, it does not use the visual as a metaphor—in the same way as the act of thought, which pretends to see, but only with the analogical eye of the *logos*. Like theatre, theory conceals a reference to sight in its etymological core. But, in this point, the relationship remains remote: what theatre wants is visibility itself in its sensorial effectiveness. This is truly to see. It is to make something happen—to make something really and physically presented in front of the tiers—to the point that, as we will see, this effectiveness of the presentation will little by little become synonymous with theatre itself. Theatre wants the body and things to be exhibited under our eyes. It wants the visible as sensation, aesthetics itself.

And this body that it wants to look at, scrutinize, this visible material of which it wants to make its theatrical object—it is the body and the material of words, which by essence are unsuitable to vision, un-showable (because they are made of sounds and of ideas). Theatre wants to see the invisible; and it is to this singular impossibility that it has been devoted for at least twenty-five centuries in Europe—but without doubt also before that, and elsewhere—all the ingenuity of its artists: actors, painters, costumers, stage designers, musicians,<sup>13</sup> dancers, stage managers, workers—the whole art of its staging [*mise-en-scène*].

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What is the utility of this assertion? Is it pure pleasure in paradox? Does one want to endow theatre with some sort of utopianism, of a vaguely Promethean disposition, which would destine it to always attempt the impossible? No, nothing of the sort. This determination of theatre—to give to vision a materiality of words [*une matière de mots*—directs us to look precisely at the activity that is played out there. And, I think perhaps this could even shed some light on the meeting of its actors and of the public that regards them.

Therefore, what theatre does is to produce something visible from words. That is exactly the content of direction [*la mise en-scène*]. Directing is an art—or know-how—that links two ends: the linguistic and the visual. This art is deployed in the space delimited by these two tenants. It is the art of passing from the one to the other, the putting in relation of the textual with the extended body. If theatre should lose anything of one of these two links it would undo itself [*il se défait*] and renounce its essence. I have said it *a propos* of the reading: theatre without visibility is not itself. It is an appendix of writing and a protuberance of literature. And the temptation always inhabits theatre such that it would be only dramatic literature or a proliferation of words. It would be a theatre without body: refolded, reabsorbed in pure vocality—but a vocality itself mutilated and deficient because the import of the voice is not reducible to its sonorous productions. It is not exhausted by listening. The actor who speaks, who proffers, who “projects” [*sort*] his voice is also an actor who offers himself to view, in the exposition of his physical effort, the corporeal action of his mouth, of his throat, the enrootedness of the breath that affects the entire body. That is also offered to the eyes—*theatre shows it*. Reduced to sound and meaning, it becomes disincarnate, emaciated, deprived of all of its charm—even those of the visible flesh of sound and of meaning.

But theatre can also lose the other link, reducing itself to the visual, to the pure remonstrance. I will propose to call *spectacle* the scenic activity that produces the visible for its own sake, without giving to vision

<sup>13</sup> The music of the theater is not simply music. It is of the music ordained for the art of showing, to make seen. One could say the same remarks appropriate to painting: the force proper to a musical score does not make for much theater [and vice-versa].



its provenance in the in-visible of the text and the words.<sup>14</sup> The spectacle is the detached body of theatre.<sup>15</sup> This is what a certain theology calls the flesh: not the body opposed to the spirit [*l'esprit*], but the body lacking spirit, the uninhabited body, the empty body.<sup>16</sup> It is not matter, therefore, but matter orphaned of its rapport with meaning. The spectacle is the visual without the invisible text that calls for it. And as this text is always already there, even for the spectacle, the spectacle is this effect of the stage that aspires to be without speech, without ordinary language, without written foundation. This is not the body, but the ideology of the corporeal—the effect of illusion that veils and covers-over the provenance of the theatrical in language and in the un-showable [*l'in-montrable*] of words.

There is a double temptation, therefore, where theatre is solicited to renounce itself twice: as literature or spectacle. Theatre remains properly between the two—between the invisible words and the extension [*l'étendue*] of the stage. It remains in this radical impropriety that de-natures the text in exhibiting it, tricks the eye in offering the words to it, and indefatigably makes seen what is improper in this display.

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The essence of the theatre is the putting/on/stage [*mise/en/scène*]. This is a provocative thesis—I already hear the cry of the leagues of virtue. We must be more precise. What makes us say this brutal affirmation? Is it an insult to the actors and a denial of their preeminence? No, quite to the contrary—if one wants to read well. This is to assert the position of their fundamental and symmetrical necessity to the principle of the act of theatre.

First, we must consider the author. So that theatre can be put/on/stage [*mise/en/scène*], it is necessary that it be directed [*mise en scène*] from something. We affirm this unambiguously: theatre is the coming to the stage of an original text, of a materiality of words [*une matière de mots*]. It is not the management of the stage, the arrangement of colors and forms, the pure disposition of the visible: this is an matter of spectacle. No theatre is produced like this. Putting/on/stage [*mise/en/scène*] is the art of bringing to view language, the verbal, and the textual. Theatre is only true to its essence insofar as it poses the anteriority of a text, distinct from the act of representation, and of which the performance [*représentation*] is the coming to be visible. The theatrical, being this coming itself (the direction, the bringing to the stage [*la mise en scène, la mise à la scène*]), cannot dispense with the first anterior text, which is distinct from it and is endowed by an autonomous existence. In this it differs from cinema, whose initial text is an instrument engaged in the production of the film. Film is achieved by the work, whereas in theatre it is writing. The text of cinema is not autonomous—this is why its rapport with publishing is more uncertain; and this is why it does not enter into the definition of its status of being suited to many successive versions. Whereas the text of theatre posits itself from the outset as distinct from all manifestations that it will embody. It is essentially apt to be brought to the stage many times, in divers countries, in divers epochs, with different actors and managers. As such it is in fact a part of the literary corpus: it exists autonomously as text and as book.

In this sense, the text of theatre is necessarily written: not that the direction [*mise en scène*] aims to reproduce its scriptural character; but it distinguishes itself from the act of its successive enunciations in that writing [*l'écriture*] poses it in this necessary autonomy with relation to the voices that would bring it.<sup>17</sup>

The text is a written work [*un écrit*], a written literary work, like a book. The author is a writer. Everything begins with the text; in it all is originated and is founded. But the text does not produce the theatricality of theatre by itself. Theatricality is not in the text. It is in the text's coming to be seen [*au regard*]. It is by this process that the words go out from themselves to produce the visible. Theatricality is the putting/on/stage [*mise/en/scène*] itself.

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Next, the actors. Many crafts work toward the exhibition of the text. Thus the scenery is judged to be good if it manifests something of the written work—and so much better if this something is more hidden, less patent. But the scenery is the object of suspicion because its relation to the text is aleatory, able to appear exterior. All theatre is “exterior”—theatre is the very movement of the exteriorization, of the becoming exterior of words. For the scenery, one fears nevertheless that the bond that unites this external figure is cut or dis-tended [*dé-tendu*].

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Denis Guénoun, *Après la révolution*, Éditions Belin, Paris, 2003, ch.4 for further discussion of this point. [trans.]

<sup>15</sup> Debord has written: separated.

<sup>16</sup> Evacuation that does not render the body to its first essence (separated matter); on the contrary, it deprives it of a part of its being—the ordinary language that inscribes it and that calls for it. The spectacle is the body of theater—aphasic, decapitated.

<sup>17</sup> There are some notorious exceptions. Recently, works by Bob Wilson or Tadeusz Kantor, for example. We indicated it above: all characterization may be demoted by the effect of its own passage to the limit. According to Hegel, “This is not in characterizing a species by any definition whatsoever that one would attain the concept of this species.... In defining, for example, the animal by free movement, by its power of displacement, one is soon aware that the oyster and all other animals do not fit under this definition; in defining it by its sensibility, one is aware that the mimosa [a sensitive plant—trans.], which is not an animal, nonetheless possesses this sensibility.” Is this the effect of the relativity of all things, rebels from the concept? This would be limited. For the case that concerns us, rather, it would be a work of the concept itself: the theatricality of these two inventors plays exactly as polemical confrontation with the essence of theater (seen as going out beyond the self of language). Theatre, as all art, is haunted by a desire to make a test of its limit, by the dream of overflowing of self of its own essence—and the dream is productive. Kantor or Wilson stretch, up to the point of rupture, the paradoxical bond of the body to the visibility of language—the estrangement of the text to the visible, the strange physique of words—the gaze of the deaf, if one wishes.



The first and the most necessary modality of the becoming-visible of language is the body of the actor who speaks it. This is the principle, the beginning of this sortie of the words before the look of the audience. This is archi-theatrical; because the bond that unites this exteriority—there with the text is necessary, stretched [*tendu*]. This bond begins in the voice, of which the ambiguity is foundational here: taking part in the sonorous universe, and therefore of that which theatre aims and looks to show. The voice is at the heart of sound and of sense [*sens*]. But, we have already said it: by his or her very body, its cords stretched in the body of the actor, this wealth of vibrant and shaken resonance originally participates in the visibility of the stage. The voice is doubly inscribed in sound and expanse. It sets and institutes their very limit. Because of this, it is at the heart and home of theatre. Not that theatre is reduced to vocality so as part of the world of sound. But theatre is produced on the exact limit of sound and body, precisely where the voice is lodged.

The actor is the source of theatricality. He or she is the point of passage from word toward body, the place of irruption, the gushing of the word onto the visible space of the stage. This is what the activity of the actor participates in very essentially—the putting/on/stage [*mise/en/scène*] as the heart of the production of theatre.

And this determines the very foundation of the actor's own proper activity: the play. The play is in no way the pure enunciation of the text for its own sake (according to the regime of literalness), any more than it is the installation at the heart of the simulated, the factitious, or the image. The play is exactly the activity that leads from the one to the other, and that makes this passage visible. The play is the passage to the play. What is properly theatrical about the play is the play of this impropriety that passes to the play, which gives birth to the play, and shows its irruption before the gaze. It is in this sense that the play is essentially ludic: the play is not its own domain, defined, circumscribed at the heart of what one would establish by *savoir-faire*. The play is the putting in play [*mise en jeu*].

To say this in another way, there is always a certain quantum of improvisation at the home or heart of the play. If the play fixes or establishes itself—whatever the directions, the imitations, and the intonations are that seem to define it at an instant—then it ceases to be a play and exhausts itself in mimetic reproduction. Certainly, the play is no stranger to imitation, but that which finds it as play is the act of imitation not the figure (the mimicry) that results from it. Without this action [*Si n'agit pas*] in the moment of the play, in some aleatory manner the coming free of a word toward the visible, if the tension that conducts from the one to the other is exhausted, if the act of playing—the passage to the play—disappears in its result, the play is eclipsed, and with it, theatre. Theatre is always the coming from the text to theatre. It is the coming from the text to the visible—itsself becoming object of the gaze.

What we are trying to determine here as the archi-theatrical of the play, its birth and the beginning of the theatrical in the play, which finds the theatricality (the putting in play, the passage to the play), has perhaps some bond with that which common language calls “natural.” Indeed, how does one explain that the public immediately disapproves of all manner of play that appears to it to be “theatrical”? For theatre, this is the limit.<sup>18</sup> How is one to understand the frequent reproach that if one sees that the actor is acting, then it is not natural? I propose here the following translation: we see the result of the play, and not the passage to the play. One does not see the play coming [*venir*], coming from [*provenir*] the non-play. One does not see the birth of the play, the birth of theatre, that is to say theatre itself. One only sees the represented—not the representation.

(Here is an unanticipated rapprochement between the question which we are considering here and that by which we raised our subject above—the political question. One could well say that the passage to the play is that which shows that the actor on the stage is a member of the community of spectators. He is natural; he is like us. He is not an actor by essence, but because at one moment he begins to act, he enters into the play. The passage to the play—this is the trace on the stage of the gesture of invitation by one who has invited the actor to take the floor [*à monter sur le plateau*]. This is the beginning of theatre, its principle, its production beginning from the city. It is its communitarian and political foundation. And the effacement of the passage to the play in pure mimicry would be like the corollary of the eclipse of the house [*salle*] for the sake of the stage, of the forgetting of the assembly of which the stage is only a part. We see why popular actors—comedians for example—play well: they do not cease passage to the play, going back and forth between [*de faire l'aller-retour*] the play and the non-play. This determines their political direction of the performance: they never forget the house [*salle*]. They bring it to witness, address the house in long monologues, multiply the asides, and ceaselessly review the feeling the house has of itself—it is one of the principle effects of laughter—and therefore are little suspected of enclosing the house within the image-space of the stage. They play from the representation, against the represented—often to the point of including this in their writing. Molière does it endlessly.)

Next, the passage to the play does not happen only in its most explicit form (the breaks and recommencements of the comic play, for example). It works at the heart of the play, always—even in the moments that are the most simulated, the most exterior, and the most fixed. It is like a home for improvisation, even at the knot of the most repetitive directions [*conduites*]. It is this art of finding the aleatory provenance in the most intimate return of the same. It is the witness of the birth of the visible from the non-visible, like a black hole, an abyss at the base of the image, attesting to its coming from nothing, and without which it is no more an

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Denis Guénoun, *Le Dénudement*, in *Les Temps Modernes*, (Jan. 1991).



image, but a thing. Deprived of the activity within it from the imaginary, of the becoming-image of image, of the fiction—it is deprived of play.

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Nothing in all of that makes an attempt upon the dignity of actors and authors. It is a question of saying that, in their activity itself, the whole of theatre consists in the staging [*mise en scène*], that is to say in this singular function that wants to open the dark and blind matter of words to the visible. Actor and author are the founding poles of theatre: the verbal, literary, and textual pole, and the physical, and corporeal pole exposed to view. All of theatre stands between them. There is nothing other than what is from them, if not for their interaction. But neither the one nor the other can do without this voyage or this passing [*parcours*] through this space which separates and unites them at the same time. To ignore it is to damn the author to the books and the actor to the spectacle. Theatre takes place in the voyage that leads from the one to the other. This is the space of interpretation and the open space of meaning. Interpretation is this coming to the sensible of meaning [*sens*]. Meaning is not contained in the words before which one proposes to them an aleatory and changing body, nor in the bodies called for by any text. Meaning is in the interpretation—broken down, provisional, and open. It lies in the passage to the play, the putting in play [*mise en jeu*] of the writings—the putting on the stage [*mise à la scène*].

*And this is what the public looks at.* The public does not look only at the bodies and the images—or, in that case, it would be to look at the spectacle, not at theatre. The public of the theatre wants to see the passage from the text to the stage. It is this demand that undergirds its very unique gaze [*regard*]. This gaze presupposes the text. It probes the stage to exhume the buried (invisible) text. Here, the gaze of the spectator is a very strange overture to listening. Not in the sense that one ought to have closed one's eyes to hear. On the contrary, one ought to open them wide to scrutinize the stage to discern there the (invisible) signs of passage from the text. That which the spectator looks at is the play of traces and imagery which attest to the physical and corporeal presence here of a text stirring in the shadows. It is obscure and whose omnipresence is a sort of active absence. The text is a book that each actor has held in hand for a long time, and the public knows it. The public looks at the conduct of the actors as it is all entirely ruled by an absent book.<sup>19</sup> The public will be profoundly deceived by theatre, misled by its own expectation, if it perceives nothing of the coming to the stage of a previously existing text. This is why new productions of classic texts have often played the role of manifesting epochal changes of theatricality—because, in a detached clearness, they give to vision the work of the text that is absent in the visible bodies and mouths. This is why new plays are so difficult to direct, and why it takes so long to read their own theatricality: because the first look dissociates in a difficult manner the text from the signs which carry it. And nevertheless this distinction is necessary so that the way from the text to the stage should be visible—so that there should be theatre. Beckett is arriving there only today.

And for all that, it is easily, all too easily won by a classic. It is more difficult—and more joyful also—to produce at the time of one's contemporary. It is this distance, this journey of the text to the stage that must be read and be seen—looking at this grounds the pleasure and the singular jubilation of the public of theatre. This is what it looks for and waits for. This is what it came to see when it assembled on the circular tiers. This pleasure is extinguished; and sometime one will be able to use again the buildings of theatre, but it will be used for something other than its vocation: the detached spectacle, the attraction of the visible to itself—the plays of blood and circuses.<sup>20</sup>

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Therefore, what they come to do at the theatre is to see the passage from the text in bodies—a curious idea.

Indeed, this activity of theatre is deployed in a very determined region. It is the place where the question is posed of the rapport of the visible with the invisible and of the sensible with the non-sensible. It is a space of interrogation with regard to the foundation of sense beyond sensation, with regard to the journey of sense toward the body. It is a place of a limit, or a passage—of a passage to the limit. It is a place where the question is opened of the rapport of the body with its other, of the founding and instituting rapport that poses the visible and the sensible—the physical—in the question of its other, of its rapport with the other. The space of theatrical activity is the space of the opening of the physical to its active and absent other. One sees that it is the space of the question of metaphysics itself.

One can henceforth advance a little along the way of determining that which founds and does theatre—of that which theatre founds and does. We remember that theatre is a political reassembly, which takes

<sup>19</sup> This is why one can take a particular sort of pleasure to see an actor perform with his or her text in hand. Thus one sees some of these performances—often memorable—where a hindered comedian is brusquely replaced by another, or by the director. These are very rare moments of theatre. That also makes with good reason the success of certain "readings" ["*lectures-spectacles*"] attempts a sort of incomplete or provisional theatre, and instead produces archi-theatre. If it is made visible there, eminently corporeal—the tumble onto the stage of these words lurks between the pages that hold the actor by the hand.

<sup>20</sup> One certainly thinks of the Roman circus—not of circuses popular in yesteryear, places of a deserving art, as much as it was, even if very different from theatre. The circus games have their analogue in our world, but elsewhere—wherever the search for the attraction of the visible for itself leads to the spectacle of blood. That attracts the eye, indeed.



place in a politically commanded space, but in order to produce there an activity that differs from the political itself. Now we know that this activity consists in giving to vision the provenance of the visible in language, the becoming visible of the un-showable [*in-monstrables*] words. That is to say that it is to attempt to open the non-sensible itself to the sensible. That which makes theatre (in the space of the political) poses the metaphysical question under the gaze of the reassembled community.

We will admit that it is a funny (political) idea.

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So, when we say that the activity of theatre is thoroughly metaphysical, do we not force the meaning of the words? No—if we understand carefully, it is not a question of announcing the question in the (philosophical) terms of what is agreed to be the discourse and the history of metaphysics. It is a matter of putting this question to work under the very particular form of a recourse to the visible of words before the reunited community. Moreover, the explicit reference to metaphysics as a genre of discourse is not necessary and it guarantees nothing that the question should be powerfully active on stage. In this regard, sometimes it is even the worst of indices. But it remains true that by nature theatrical activity wants that the question should be posed there. Here is one last confirmation of this.

Because theatre is no longer what it was. The conditions of its practice have been profoundly transformed by the possibility of its mechanical reproduction.<sup>21</sup> As one knows, Walter Benjamin, and others afterward, has ventured out according to a new problematic—the consideration of that which changes in art when the work no longer is presented according to the singular radiation (the aura) of a unique original. A painting differs by its aura from the series of its copies. In return, a photograph is only a multiplicity of copies of variable quality but of equivalent dignity with regard to the rapport with “the essence” of the work. In the strict sense of the word, there is no original photograph, but only a copy-witness, a standard. Now, the possibility of an indefinite mechanical reproduction produces in turn an effect on the conditions of the practice of art. The invention of the photograph modifies the history of painting. What does this say for theatre, considered under this rapport?

Since the beginning of this century,<sup>22</sup> theatre has come to know the brutal and menacing irruption of its mechanical reproduction: the cinema. Cinema, in at least one of the ways opened by its birth, assumes its place as photographed theatre. Sometimes, but they are few, theatre prepares itself for this rivalry by appealing to the prevalence of the original before the multiple (and, it thinks, feeble) copies. Here, this defense does not hold. For economic reasons and soon for artistic reasons as well, the competition between the two “theatres” becomes tough. Cinema seems to enjoy all of the advantages, and especially in its aptitude in figuring all of that which escapes theatre: races, mountains, crowds, and animals.

This concurrence demands each of the two arts to affirm its originality. For cinema, it leads to the elaboration of a lexicon, of a syntax of its own that relates to it—close ups, camera movements, and montage. And for theatre? What effect do the appearance and subsequent quasi-universal diffusion of filmed images have on theatre?

They call theatre to deepen its essence. Soon theatre becomes the position before the observer of that which is not filmable. That is to say, it is that which eludes all reproduction—the position of the thing itself or of the being-there of the thing. Theatre becomes the gesture of showing [*monstration*], inasmuch as it aims not at the form of the object shown, its figure, its pattern, its color—all that which the camera would capture and indefinitely reproduce; but it becomes this gesture inasmuch as it puts before the gaze, there, before our eyes, the thing itself in its phenomenality, the appearance of its being-there, the there of its being-there, that which once would name its appearing-there. The appearing-there of the thing is its theatricality.

Evidently this can only reinforce the metaphysical determination of the theatrical. Henceforth, theatre is no longer content with summoning forth onto the stage the visible arising from words. It interrogates the appearing-there of the thing itself, making use of the unique (political) condition of its appearance (-there). It is that which makes the words produce this visible-there, as an is there [*en tant qu'il est là*]<sup>23</sup>—this gushing forth of visibility, of sensibility, there before the reunited people, before its eye, in the actuality of its reassembly, on these tiers, in this city, on this very day and this very hour.

It is for this reason, and only from now on, that one can emancipate theatre a little from its rapport with the eye, with ocularity as the conspicuous sensation. This rapport (the showing [*monstration*] of the appearing-there, of the becoming-sensible-there of words) is indeed extendable to listening, but at the limit. One can imagine—but as a sort of extreme—a theatre of sounds, a theatre of shadow. It would be theatre of the night, of eclipse, of the moment of obscurity that opposes the light as silence lives in music. This moment where, by the ear also, the appearing-there of a body is made proof—of a breath, of a voice—a moment that indeed can be heard blindly. But this is the brink of sensation, its confirmation by the extreme—should the eyes even search the dark. Besides, there is no theatre of the nose or of the hands.<sup>23</sup>

21 The development which follows makes evident reference to Walter Benjamin: *L'oeuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée*, whose diverse publications in French are: WB, *Écrits français*, Nrf 1991.

22 The author refers to the twentieth century here.—[trans.]

23 In the sense of an impossible theatre of odor or of touch.



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What is, therefore, this strange (political) idea of theatre? This idea that has theatre and that it puts on stage [*met en scène*] in the space of the political? Why is the assembly of spectators convoked publicly, to reunite in place of the political in order to see the metaphysical question posed there? What is the bearing [*portée*], the (political) signification of this reassembly?

We can say it in one phrase: the bearing of this reassembly would should be to direct the community to consider the non-political foundation of the political. This brings us to observe that the political does not have its foundation in itself, but that it is the respondent to some other thing. The political results from a necessity that surpasses it, which it must serve, before which it must respond. The political is not its own proper horizon, and this is to work away at its indignity, that which encloses it only in consideration of itself. Without this it never would have to open itself to this other that it inscribes and which it names. This is the (political) idea of theatre: to reassemble the city, to reunite publicly in the actualization of its desire for community, to invite to sit [*siéger*] in place of political assembly in order to open the political to the something other than itself.<sup>24</sup> This is, therefore, to do a little metaphysics, no doubt; but not in the obliged production of the words and syntax of metaphysical discourse. It is metaphysical in the looking upon visible signs that exhibit a hidden speech, an absent book, to expose it to view as the sensible play of texts and of bodies.

In order to be apt there, without doubt it is necessary for theatre to have the dignity never to believe it to be simply a play on a stage, a titillation to see. It must keep in mind that it only shows itself here because it has been invited there by a reunited community. It must never obscure this, nor forget this in the shadow of admiring itself, nor ever yield to the political desire to reduce it to silence and to put it in line. Now it is this community that institutes it in its mad desire to look at the invisible. And so that there can be theatre, the community must be free, at least a little, for its reassemblies, for its narratives, and for the injunctions that it chooses to address to itself by inviting strangers to take their place within its circle—in order to exhibit the unshowable [*l'inmontrable*] in words.

*La Chartreuse, Villeneuve-lez-Avignon*

April, 1991

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<sup>24</sup> This is where the political of theatre is not measured by the politicization of its content. Its political bearing resides precisely in its capacity to produce a non-political question, and to interrogate the political in its name. This can figure in the text—or not (solely to work the assembly). Perhaps it is necessary to see there a reason to sing and to dance. The song marks this speech as poetic, and therefore non-political: the political does not sing. And the dance is like a physical exposition of the song. It makes the poetic of speech—the musical, the rhythmic—come to be visible in the body.



#### FOUR OBJECTIONS

1.) *Can theatre really convoke a political community?* No: I do not mean to say here that theatre convokes it. Rather, it is convoked. This is not a task for it—to convoke that which it is. (But what is “it”? Is it someone? I doubt it; “The” theatre is no one. It is neither a subject nor an actor; it is just an act, or acts, occasionally an event.) A convocation occurs [*se produit*]. The convocation is public. And the convocation unmistakably makes a political affair of the representation. Rather, that which convokes theatre comes from the side of the political itself. Then is it the political? It will be supposed that the political convokes, which I also doubt. Something convokes (and the political, and theatre). The distribution of their difference is instituted from this common provenance.

2.) *Does the essence of the political really lie in the community, or in something else (the rapport with the state)?* This objection is evidently cut from another cloth. It traverses, as one knows, a debate in process. One thing strikes me: the difference of reflection that is revealed there (between a thought that can re-think the community and another that wants to free itself of it). This marks again an old political opposition with regard to revolutionary democracy—as if, in the end, it replayed the confrontation between those who were of the council [*conseillistes*] and those who were not.<sup>25</sup> Is this nostalgia [*Passéisme*]? Not at all. Fidelity works. It simply appears to me that it is not only to pose a question of the political—but as a political question, also.

3. *Does not this characterization of theatre also work just as well for painting?* Will we have inadvertently perched ourselves on the *topos* of all art as the coming from thought to the sensible? Perhaps. But the invisible convoked here is that of words and not of ideas, of the ineffable, of the interiority of the subject. As for painters, I would readily risk this thesis: painting does not proceed from the invisible to the visible. It begins with the visible, fair and good, founds itself in the gaze. It ends there as well. But it does so by a necessary detour, an obliged *sortie* beyond the space given to view. This trajectory, this between-times, I would well see there its invisible producer—rather the unseen, the no longer seen that always projects it. From the visible to the visible: it is the trace of this step outside of the world (of the seen) that perhaps proposes itself to be looked at—as gesture of painting, as dab, as stroke.

4. *Is the non-political founding of the political, in essence, religious?* No, decidedly not. Theatre only happens this exact moment that a becoming where the space of the city differs from religious space (of the cult). I only see theatre, decidedly, at the precise point of this becoming-profane. This is where theatre crosses over in extreme proximity to the cult from which it proceeds, from which it exits (and it is without doubt the place of some imaginary confusions). But it exits from it, literally: to Athenians where the performance [*représentation*] is displaced leaving from the temple (and institutes itself in this displacement); as in the medieval moment where the “mystery” is produced on the church square, without doubt all right next to the church, but beyond it. And the assembly must exit from the cult for theatre to take place [*ait lieu*]. There is no theatre in occupied space, saturated by the cult (or the rite). Theatre comes in the movement, the moment—the space opens by separation from the city. And it emerges in its vicinity, therefore, and often in this nostalgia—or even this ideology of a cultural, ritual, and mystical theatricality. But nothing can be done: theatre is tied to the advent of a city separated<sup>26</sup> from the assembly of the cult, to the production of the profane or the civic—of the political itself. If it were a religious matter, the political would need nothing from theatre in order to interrogate its political foundation. Its own mythical ascendance (its legends, epics of origin) from its own genealogy in the cults (the rites, the myths) would suffice for this. And regarding the dream of re-foundation and a return: if politics and theatre are convoked side by side, it is because the religious has fallen into the past. The theatrical is there to bear witness of this passage, of this step. Theatre can only witness the religious in its fall, never in the restoration of its origin. The exposé of this decrepitude of first religion unceasingly exhibits the production of the theatrical—and, from the *Orestae* to the *Ring*, it is often that which theatre recounts.

In the end, I want to address to myself this final objection: is the becoming-visible of words the incarnation after all? Is it the Word become flesh? Is all of this business therefore theological? Permit me to respond (to me) in this way: perhaps. But not in the sense that theology would in the end assign the place found at the foundation of the political, but of which the idea, on the contrary, that theology, in certain of its periods, conceals the risk of an interruption<sup>27</sup> of the religious, of a holiday given to the cult, of a profane opening. In this sense, the word [*verbe*] is not simply all divine. The word [*verbe*] is the divine fallen [*tombé*]*—fallen* [*déchu*] from its being: the death of God, without doubt. It is rather an atheology that lurks there, even if it does not claim to forget that which it leaves. But it does take leave of it.

<sup>25</sup> Sovietists, federalists, Rousseauists, as you will. Assemblists, ecclesiasts. “And therefore, you?” you ask. Ah, I rather have been. Something of the commune moves me, where, to me, the dispersed singularities (and republican regulation) cannot suffice.

<sup>26</sup> Here I am reading *sortie* instead of *sotie* in the text. [trans.]

<sup>27</sup> I am borrowing (it is a little like saying: I am pilfering, I am stealing) the idea for this term from Daniel Payot.